



Following America's victory in the War of 1812 (aka America's "Second War for Independence"), the nation embarked on a massive wave of expansion on all fronts, not the least of which was significant movement westward in what would become known as "manifest destiny." Although the purchase of the Louisiana Territory from France in 1803 had doubled the size of the United States, there was still plenty more land to acquire (most of it would come at the expense of war with Mexico in 1846-8). Once the vast territory had been secured to form the present shape of the continental 48 states—the final puzzle piece was the 1853 Gadsden Purchase—the government aggressively pursued settlement and economic development of the West. A crucial ingredient (besides people, of course) was the railroad industry. Since it was initially unprofitable for companies to construct and operate railways through the desolate West, the government would offer subsidies to entice railroads to extend westward. This financial aid came in the form of land. The Pacific Railway Act of 1862 set the precedent by granting to the Central Pacific and Union Pacific five alternate sections (square miles) of public domain on both sides of the track for every mile of rail laid. Thus, America's first "transcontinental" railway, stretching practically 1,800 miles from Omaha to Sacramento, was completed in 1869. The gift of free land worked once; why not continue the practice? Before the end of the century, three more government funded railway routes will cross the West. [In total, the government gave in excess of 175 million acres of land to various railroads. The sum acreage is equivalent to the states of Ohio, Pennsylvania, New York, and the New England states combined—or an area one-tenth the size of the United States!](#) The federal government contributed about 70 percent; the states roughly 30 percent. Again and again, land was the government's currency of motivation.